

**Testimony of David A. Coddington
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**U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on International Relations
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights
and International Operations**

“Zimbabwe: Prospects for Democracy after the March 2005 Elections”

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and members of the Subcommittee, for organizing this hearing and inviting me to testify. I am honored to have this opportunity.

My name is Dave Coddington. I am the Southern Africa Regional Representative for Catholic Relief Services, based in Baltimore, MD. Catholic Relief Services has been implementing projects in Zimbabwe since 1989, and is today one of the largest non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating there, serving an estimated 400,000 people.

Zimbabwe's economy was once the fastest growing in Africa, but is now in the midst of a complex humanitarian crisis the main causes of which include:

- an adult HIV infection rate of 24%¹,
- four consecutive years of drought,
- triple-digit inflation,
- 50-70% unemployment
- and the lack of foreign capital necessary to access basic commodities.

Salaries are devaluing so fast that working Zimbabweans are finding it increasingly difficult to feed their families, send their children to school, care for sick relatives, or even travel to and from work. Basic commodities, when available, are becoming unaffordable even for those who consider themselves “middle class.”

Counterproductive policies by the Government of Zimbabwe have caused these factors. A controversial land reform program - which began in 2000 to address what many Zimbabweans regard as historic wrongs and injustices - has badly damaged the once lucrative agricultural sector, a traditional source of export earnings and foreign exchange. Over 400,000 agricultural jobs have been lost in the wake of the land reform process. The tourism sector, once a major source of foreign exchange and revenue, has also collapsed. Furthermore, the IMF recently suspended Zimbabwe due to its failure to meet budgetary goals and financial obligations.

According to the UNAIDS 2004 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic, 1.6 million of Zimbabwe's 12 million citizens were living with HIV at the end of 2003. Life expectancy in Zimbabwe has decreased from 52 years in 1990 to 34 years in 2003. This health crisis cascades into other crises as family breadwinners die or fall ill and families are increasingly exposed to poverty and food insecurity. 170,000 Zimbabweans died in 2003 due to AIDS, and nearly 1,000,000 Zimbabwean children have lost one or both parents to AIDS.² Though the extended family is the historic social safety net for orphaned children, this safety net is disintegrating as the epidemic affects more and more

¹ UNAIDS 2004 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic

² UNAIDS 2004 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic

families. Increasing numbers of children and youth are homeless or living in child-headed households. Yesterday's Washington Post chronicled the dramatic effects of AIDS in one village in southern Zimbabwe. Our staff see these effects throughout the country. If anything, the article did not go far enough exploring the cascading influences of AIDS in Zimbabwe. Many children drop out of school as education - with its enrollment, uniform and book fees - has become a cost-prohibitive luxury. While the awareness and psychosocial support available through school is critical in altering the high-risk behavior that is fueling the HIV/AIDS epidemic, as more and more children drop out the prospect of reversing the epidemic among the next generation is increasingly bleak. Consequently, a downward spiral of economic and social conditions is gripping Zimbabwe. High-risk behavior fuels the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which fuels economic collapse, which fuels a breakdown in social services and education, which leads in turn to more high-risk behavior.

The most immediate threat to the people of Zimbabwe is food insecurity. Stocks of basic commodities - particularly the staple corn - are increasingly scarce, and when available, are too expensive for many Zimbabweans to buy. There are three main causes of the current food insecurity: 1) a lack of food stocks and poor agricultural production; 2) runaway inflation that continuously drives up the price of food; and 3) an operating environment that limits the ability of international aid agencies to effectively target and deliver emergency food to the most vulnerable. In May 2004, the Government of Zimbabwe projected that Zimbabwe would, over the next year, produce sufficient quantities of corn to feed its people, and would likely even produce a surplus for export. So certain was the government of its agricultural productive capacity that it told the donor community to halt food importations and cease all general, and some targeted, feeding programs. Many international and domestic experts argued that the government's agricultural production projections were incorrect and another food crisis was likely. Last year, Zimbabwe's estimated corn consumption was 1.8 million metric tons. Experts say requirements could be even greater this year. As of November 2004, near the end of the harvest period, only about 400,000 metric tons had been sold to the government's Grain Marketing Board, the sole entity allowed to procure and market corn in Zimbabwe.

Despite a recent UNICEF study showing alarming increases in infant malnutrition throughout the country, particularly in orphanages and in the south, no formal requests for assistance have yet been made by the government of Zimbabwe to the United Nations or any other donor. Many in the international community fear that by the time the Zimbabwean government acknowledges publicly that it has a serious shortfall in corn production, it may be difficult to quickly mount an effective international effort to prevent wide scale acute food insecurity.

Catholic Relief Services' major objectives in responding to these threats are:

- 1) To help communities to effectively prevent the spread of HIV and to mitigate its impact through increased capacity and awareness;
- 2) To mitigate the impact of disasters, ensuring food and economic security for vulnerable individuals, households and communities, particularly those affected by HIV/AIDS; and,
- 3) To build the capacity of local organizations and communities to advocate against unjust structures compromising the rights of people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS.

Towards these ends, Catholic Relief Services implements a variety of programming activities. For example, at the height of famine relief efforts in 2002-03, Catholic Relief Services and our partner organizations provided nutritional assistance to 180,000 food insecure Zimbabweans each month with funding from the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), Food for Peace (FFP) and the World Food Programme. Catholic Relief Services and our partners currently provide fertilizer and seeds to 60,000 farming families with funding from the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID). And since 2002, we have provided direct educational assistance to 88,000 orphans and other vulnerable children with the support of USAID and other donors.

But the operating environment in which NGOs function in Zimbabwe is increasingly frustrating our relief efforts. Many NGOs, like Catholic Relief Services, are working in Zimbabwe to alleviate hunger, strengthen the livelihood strategies of marginalized populations, and mitigate the impact and reduce the prevalence of HIV and AIDS. Yet these efforts are being severely hampered by the Government of Zimbabwe, resulting in the scaling back of operations or departure of many NGOs. This is a tragic irony given that the humanitarian needs are escalating while resources are dwindling. If the

operational environment for Catholic Relief Services and other NGOs in Zimbabwe does not improve, the current crisis will certainly deepen.

To compound matters, beginning in August 2004, NGOs have been subjected to unprecedented denials of work permits for international relief and development workers. Some organizations, albeit a few, have seen all of their work permit appeals rejected and have had to close shop in Zimbabwe. Unexplainable delays in the importation of food, other agricultural products and anti-retroviral drugs have resulted in the unnecessary delays or complete shutdowns of some relief interventions. Underlying these bureaucratic pressures is the increasingly difficult economic environment in which an artificially low international exchange rate has greatly inflated the operating costs. International organizations such as CRS must exchange US dollars at the current government designated auction rate of Z\$6,200 to US\$1 but goods and services are generally priced at the parallel rate of Z\$17,000 to US\$1. The rent for our office space, for example, has increased by 200% within the span of one month. Our national staff have demanded an increase of 450% in their salaries to keep up with inflation. Finally, a series of government investigations into the work of international NGOs, carrying the threat of prosecution and fines, accompanied by unprecedented attacks against NGOs in the official newspaper, are eroding our capacity to carry out efficient and effective relief and development programs.

Catholic Relief Services and our colleagues in the NGO community are committed to helping the people of Zimbabwe through this crisis. It is abundantly clear that more international resources are needed in Zimbabwe to halt and eventually reverse the present momentum of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and to restore dignified and sustainable livelihoods for millions who are suffering from food insecurity. But it is also clear that the impact of international aid in Zimbabwe is severely mitigated by the political environment in which NGOs are forced to function, which only the Government of Zimbabwe can change. Until these changes occur and Zimbabwe's government allows the humanitarian community unimpeded access to the most vulnerable, humanitarian aid to Zimbabwe will continue to be a high-risk and costly investment. However, even given the risk, Catholic Relief Services believes foreign aid must continue as an act of solidarity and support for the most vulnerable and marginalized of Zimbabwean society.

Catholic Relief Services therefore respectfully submits the following recommended actions for consideration by the House:

- 1) Donors, UN agencies or other recognized international bodies must advocate to allow the humanitarian community to conduct a comprehensive and transparent assessment of Zimbabwe's food security situation.
- 2) The US Government and international community must increase the emergency and developmental aid available to the UN and international aid agencies in Zimbabwe.
- 3) The US Government and the international community must remain engaged with the Government of Zimbabwe and support the work of respected non-governmental organizations by negotiating to remove bureaucratic obstacles to humanitarian assistance.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, Catholic Relief Services emphasizes that the situation in Zimbabwe is a serious humanitarian crisis. We believe that the US Government has a crucial role to play by remaining engaged with the Government of Zimbabwe to ensure that urgent humanitarian needs are addressed. We urge Congress to work with the Administration to provide adequate support and resources, and build the coalitions necessary to ensure that humanitarian aid reaches the people of Zimbabwe in time to prevent further hardships. Thank you for your support of the work of non-governmental organizations such as Catholic Relief Services in Zimbabwe. I welcome the opportunity to respond to any questions you may have.